

## **A COMPARISON OF ANCIENT AND MODERN CONCEPTIONS OF HAPPINESS AND LEISURE**

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In an intriguing overview of research related to leisure, enjoyment, and the good life, Estes and Henderson (2001) posed a provocative question: “What do people need to know to pursue the good life, and what roles do leisure service providers have in maximizing people’s enjoyment?” (p. 22). In their response they paid homage to classical Greek philosophy on *eudaimonia* (happiness), *aretē* (virtue), and *scholē* (leisure), implying that it is a seminal source in a historical progression leading from antiquity to the modern idea of happiness and leisure. Although separated by 2,500 years, the ancient and the modern conceptions of happiness and leisure are thus supposedly close relatives. Yet they are conceptually, ethically, socially, and politically as different as night and day. Therefore, the purpose of this analysis was to compare the ancient and the modern conceptions of happiness and leisure, explaining their differences and exploring their implications for contemporary theory and practice.

### **Ancient Conceptions of Happiness and Leisure: Aristotle’s View**

According to Annas (1993), “The question ‘In what does happiness consist?’ is the most important and central question in ancient ethics” (p. 46). A variety of views on the subject were offered in antiquity, including versions from Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, and the Stoics. Aristotle’s theory was chosen for the purpose of comparing ancient and modern conceptions of happiness and leisure for several reasons. First, it was one of the major and most influential theories of its time. Second, Aristotle offers the most complete theory of the relationship between happiness, virtue, and leisure. Third, it continues to receive much attention from modern thinkers (e.g., MacIntyre, 1981; Rorty, 1980), attesting to its ongoing relevance. Cautioning that space permits only the broadest sketch of a remarkably rich, intricate, and controversial subject, Aristotle’s theory of happiness and leisure will be outlined next.

Aristotle observes in the *Nicomachean Ethics* that people generally agree that happiness (*eudaimonia*) is the best life for human beings, making it the purpose and final end of life. After considering several candidates, including honor, wealth, and pleasure, Aristotle proposes that happiness should reflect what is best in human beings. Everything in the universe possesses a special function (*ergon*) according to Aristotle, which embodies its excellence. Aristotle uses the example of a lyre player to illustrate the relation between function and excellence, stating, “the function of a lyre-player is to play the lyre, and that of a good lyre-player is to do so well” (*Nicomachean Ethics*, 1098a11-12). He locates the special function and the best part of human beings in their capacity to live a life according to reason, stating, “human good turns out to be activity of soul in conformity with excellence” (1098a16). The rational part of the soul consists of two excellences, moral and intellectual. The exact relation between the two has received extensive debate and discussion (see Ackrill, 1974; Kraut, 1989). Nonetheless, Aristotle believes moral and intellectual excellences are both integral parts of happiness. While contemplation is the most perfect and pleasant life, giving a divine crown to happiness, everything that was proper to human excellence, including music, friendship, gymnastics, and citizenship, are also constitutive of happiness (Owens, 1981).

Therefore, one piece of Aristotle's ethical theory involves knowledge of happiness, for living the good life necessitates knowing what target to aim at. Knowledge alone, however, is not sufficient. Aristotle explains, "Since happiness is an activity of soul in accordance with complete excellence, we must consider the nature of excellence [virtue]" (1102a5). An essential and complex aspect of ancient ethics (Annas, 1993), virtue is a deeply rooted disposition to do the morally right thing, requiring the ability to reason and to respond emotionally in the morally right way. Specifically, Aristotelian virtue involves choosing the mean between the extremes of deficiency and excess. Rather than an arithmetic mean, Aristotle's mean consists of knowing in each situation how to choose the right activity at the right time and doing it in the right way with the right feeling. For example, rashness and cowardice are the extremes of courage. Depending on the situation, sometimes great bravery is called for, while at other times caution is warranted. Like a good archer, the virtuous individual is able to hit the moral mark consistently, acting nobly in all facets of life. Virtue also means choosing activities that reflect the best qualities of human beings, such as the intrinsic goods of music and citizenship. The virtuous person also uses external goods in a manner conducive to happiness. For example, the virtuous person realizes that making money beyond what is needed for a secure and comfortable life interferes with morally superior activities, such as contemplation, friendship, and politics. As such, he knows when to turn from moneymaking to leisure.

The necessity to labor limited the opportunity for happiness, giving leisure a critical place in Aristotle's ethics. Ancient Greeks mainly used the term leisure (*scholē*) in two ways (Hunnicut, 1990). One was the ordinary sense of having free-time. The other was the freedom to engage in virtuous activity. Therefore, leisure is the "first principle of all [good] action" (1337b31), for "happiness," Aristotle declares, "is thought to depend on leisure" (1177b4). Because leisure was intended for living the best life, Aristotle explains in chapter three of the *Politics* that the sons of Athens' citizens must be educated primarily for a life of noble leisure (Simpson, 1998).

The relationship between happiness, virtue, and leisure can now be summarized. Happiness is a lifetime of virtuous activity (excellence) made possible by the opportunity of leisure, leisure being the condition of freedom from the need to labor as well as freedom for the noble exercise of a person's highest capacities. While the individual who is *eudaimon* is happy in the subjective sense of experiencing pleasure or enjoyment in happiness, pleasure and happiness are not the same. Pleasure is a subjective state. Happiness is an objective condition consisting of virtuous leisure that is recognized by others as praiseworthy because it expresses what is most excellent in a human being.

### **The Modern Conception of Happiness and Leisure**

Although literature on the modern relationship between happiness and leisure is extensive (see Estes & Henderson, 2001; Carruthers & Deyell-Hood, 2004), its fundamental principle is remarkably simple. Estes and Henderson (2001) aptly summarize it, explaining, "what constitutes a good life is people *thinking* they're living good lives. This idea, known as subjective well-being, refers to people's mental and emotional evaluations of their own lives" (p. 24, emphasis added). Therefore, "happiness frequently lies only within the perspective of the individual" (p. 28). A close companion of subjective happiness, subjective leisure is a state of mind consisting of two

conditions—perceived freedom and intrinsic motivation (Neulinger, 1981). Of the two, perceived freedom is most fundamental, for “leisure has one and only one essential criterion, and that is the condition of perceived freedom” (Neulinger, p. 15). Thus, an “activity is leisure if it is perceived as leisure by the individual participant” (Witt & Ellis, 1985, p. 106), which means that “no activity is inherently not a leisure activity” (Neulinger, p. 35). A subjective experience that can occur at any time and place, leisure produces feelings of pleasure, satisfaction, and enjoyment, enabling the individual to feel happy.

### **A Concise Comparison of Ancient and Modern Conceptions of Happiness and Leisure**

Despite Estes and Henderson’s (2001) allusion to an association between ancient and modern conceptions and Neulinger’s (1981) explicit claim that subjective leisure may “be considered a direct offspring of [classical leisure]” (p. 18), they exist in different worlds. Most fundamentally, Aristotle’s theory is objective and the modern theory is subjective. Aristotelian happiness is a product of what people do (live virtuously) and what people have (sufficient health, wealth, and the leisure to exercise virtue). Not only do commentators recognize Aristotle’s view as an objective action (Arendt; 1958; Zeller, 1957), Aristotle himself wrote:

It makes, perhaps, no small difference whether we place the chief good in possession or in use, in state or in activity. For the state may exist without producing any good result but the activity cannot; for one who has the activity will of necessity be acting, and acting well. (1099a1-3)

On the other hand, modern happiness and leisure are ultimately matters determined by individual appraisals of mental and affective states. Two people living entirely different lives—one volunteering her time to social justice, another prowling the internet searching for sexual liaisons with children—could equally judge themselves as experiencing leisure and feeling happy. There is no disputing happiness or leisure in the modern view; they are what individuals say they are. Conversely, Aristotle’s conception provides “an objective topic for disputes about how a human being should live” (McDowell, 1980, p. 372). Furthermore, whereas ancient ethics was mainly concerned with virtue, the ethical theory of utilitarianism best suits modern happiness and leisure, since the goal is to maximize feelings of pleasure. (In the ancient conception, pleasure comes from happiness, a byproduct or accompaniment of virtue. In the modern conception, pleasure is happiness.)

### **Implications**

Although the vast differences between the ancient and the modern conceptions of happiness and leisure raise numerous social, ethical, political, and theoretical implications, space permits including only a couple. With regard to theory, there have been serious attempts to incorporate ancient conceptions in developing modern theories of happiness and leisure (see Widmer & Ellis, 1998; Carruthers & Deyell-Hood, 2004). By understanding their differences, theorists will be able to use ancient conceptions to the advantage of modern theory without corrupting ancient accounts and without producing specious associations that only yield errors and contradictions. With regard to practice, the modern conception mainly casts leisure service providers in the role of “engineers” of

leisure experience (see Mannell, 1985). In its most radical formulation, this would place providers in the troubling role of inducing people to think they are experiencing leisure and happiness no matter what the reality. Considering this *Brave New World* scenario unlikely, I believe the psychology of happiness and leisure has much to offer the well-being of people. Nonetheless, correctly applying ancient conceptions to modern times would demand inquiry into subjects besides psychology, especially ethics (see Goodale, 1985), politics (see Hemingway, 1988), and the role of education in happiness and leisure.

In Goodale's (1985) words, "If leisure is to matter" (p. 54), theory and practice must involve something more than mind over matter or mind despite matter. How people actually live their lives must make a difference. Therefore, in seeking answers to Estes and Henderson's (2003) question, "What do people need to know to pursue the good life, and what roles do leisure service providers have in maximizing people's enjoyment?" (p. 22), the ancient and the modern conceptions of happiness and leisure, their relationship properly understood, offer an interesting challenge and opportunity.

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**ABSTRACTS**  
**of Papers Presented at the**  
**Eleventh Canadian Congress on Leisure Research**  
**May 17 – 20, 2005**  
**Hosted by**  
**Department of Recreation and Tourism Management**  
**Malaspina University-College**  
**Nanaimo, B.C.**  
**Abstracts compiled and edited by**  
**Tom Delamere, Carleigh Randall, David Robinson**  
**CCLR-11 Programme Committee**  
**Tom Delamere**  
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**Rick Rollins**  
**and**  
**David Robinson**



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**ISBN 1-896886-01-9**



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